

**THE POLICE
HOW-TO
GUIDES**

**HOW TO MASTER
STRESS MANAGEMENT**

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HOW TO MASTER STRESS MANAGEMENT

*If you don't get a
handle on your
stress it will take
over*



*The author practices Qigong in a natural setting. Photo:
Amaury Murgado.*

Stress is an officer's number one nemesis. During a call, it creates automatic psychological and physiological responses that reduce your effectiveness. Too much stress and it affects your health. We hear conventional wisdom almost every day on how to handle stress and yet we don't use it. We've heard it so much that we are desensitized to the problem.

I'm going to use a different approach and leave conventional wisdom behind. I am going to give you some unconventional wisdom in the form of two options that you probably never considered.

The Problem

A number of researchers have suggested that law enforcement is the most stressful profession in America. After all, we deal with the underbelly of civilization. The small percentage of the population that everyone else steers clear from, we as officers steer right into and choose to work deep in their midst. We do this every day. But what we don't realize is we do so at a great personal cost.

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Stress is a culprit that has many ugly sides. For example, more law enforcement officers die of suicide than of heart attacks. Stress also contributes to alcoholism, drug abuse, and the second highest divorce rate in the nation. We have all seen instances where stress has had a negative impact on our friends, family, and fellow officers. Left unmanaged, stress can ruin your career and destroy your life.

And Yet We Ignore It Anyway

As officers we ignore stress and drive on as if it were part of a crusade. Whether we choose to accept it or not, it's our responsibility as individuals to handle it. Think about how many of us work long hours, hit an off-duty job soon after, and then get up and do it all over again the next day. Most of us sleep very little, eat like crap, and continuously ride an emotionally and adrenaline-filled roller coaster.

When it comes to taking care of ourselves, the only thing we agree upon is that exercise looks really good on cable. Even worse, many of us never break our cycle of denial until we physically crash and get sick. The sad truth is we don't do anyone any good when we go down. Stress isn't the problem, we are.

According to Medicinenet.com, "There is now evidence that points to abnormal stress responses as causing various diseases or conditions. These include anxiety disorders, depression, high blood pressure, and cardiovascular disease, certain gastrointestinal diseases, some cancers, and even the process of aging itself." In other words, the effects of stress on our health are real so just ignoring them won't make them go away. Another reality is that stress chips away at our longevity. Some scientists suggest that human beings could live up to 120 years but the typical police officer doesn't even come close.

Technology Doesn't Help, It Hurts

You'd think today's technology would ease some of our burden. It has made our lives more productive, but to what end?

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Information flows at the speed of a computer's mouse click. Snail mail is losing its appeal and sending a fax is becoming a thing of the past. Unfortunately, there is too much information being passed on and it's coming too fast. The demand on your time has sky rocketed and everybody still wants everything done yesterday.

Information might be traveling at the speed of light but solutions rarely do. There was a time when getting something done immediately was manageable by prioritizing or using project management, but it's becoming more and more difficult.

Take for example my experience after a recent six-day vacation. Upon my return I had eight tasks waiting for me in addition to what I'd already been working on when I'd left. These included an internal investigation I had to conduct, creating a sample policy for the part-time tactical flight officer program I had suggested, and helping to make breakfast for our section the next day. Being new to the unit, I didn't know the breakfast was something the captain did every year around the holidays. The point is, no matter how caught up we think we are, or how good we are at putting out fires, it just never seems to end.

The Key

The best advice I ever got for dealing with stress came from a sergeant major I knew while serving on active duty with the Army. He worked out every day and looked very impressive for someone in his late 50s. He was never sick and had the energy of a four-year-old high on candy. He told me the secret was to make time for yourself every day.

He impressed upon me that no one would take care of me unless I took care of me. He also taught me one of my management mantras that I still use today: It's either an emergency or it's not. Since there are very few real emergencies, then you have the time. Finding what to do with that time then becomes the question.

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Unconventional Solutions

Instead of the traditional Western advice to take time off, eat right, exercise, get enough rest, and drink chamomile tea, let's look at how the Eastern half of the world deals with stress. A significant part of the day there includes focused training, an idea that is finally starting to catch on here in the West.

For centuries in Eastern traditions, the benefits of Qigong (pronounced chi-kung) techniques have been well known. Now, experts in Western medicine and psychology have verified its effectiveness. Qigong is a series of postures or simple movements that combine deep breathing and relaxation techniques. It helps center you by improving your mind and body connection. The postures move every joint, work your full range of motion, and are considered low-impact exercise. What you may not know is that Qigong dates back to the 12th century and is the foundation for many internal Chinese martial arts like Bagua, Hsing-I, and the most well known, Tai Chi.

Tai Chi is both martial art and a system of gentle physical exercise. To do Tai Chi, you perform a series of movements in a slow and seamless manner, each posture flowing into the next without stopping (not as easy as you might think). You are moving while doing this and you often squat, bend, turn, and jump. It's not unlike other types of martial arts forms training. By adding breathing techniques, the Tai Chi movements become a form of Qigong and create another great way to reduce your stress.

You Already Do Qigong

You already practice deep breathing automatically while you sleep. All of your body's healing and rebuilding occurs during that time. Deep breathing helps to increase oxygen flow to your vital organs. It helps cleanse, nourish, and heal them. Purposefully exercising in this way is therefore an extension of something you already do naturally.

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When you practice Qigong or Tai Chi, it makes you live in the moment by focusing all of your attention on the movements and the breathing. This helps you push the world aside for a while, which is exactly what you need. Everyone needs a time out, a chance to decompress and unwind. By the end of a training session you feel relaxed, focused, and have an enhanced sense of well-being. I know this to be true because it's how I start my day. The only time I don't is when I'm sick or injured.

Qigong

There are literally thousands of Qigong exercises available for study and use. Probably the most well known are variations of the Baduanjin (Eight Pieces of Brocade), the Wu Qin Xi (Five Animal Frolics), and the Yijin Jing (Muscle/Tendon Change Classic). Unlike Tai Chi, the less complicated Qigong exercises can be mostly learned from reference material.

I follow a combination of several movements from the many routines I have learned over the years. I have taken the ones I am most fond of and put them together into one series. I also have broken it down further into a short session and a long session, and I choose one depending on what's going on that day. If you do a quick check on the Internet, you will find plenty of resources (most are free) to get started. My starting place was finding the World Tai Chi Association and the efforts of Master Peter Hill. I use the association's Five Organ and Five Centering Sets as my base for Qigong training.

Tai Chi

Unfortunately, when most people think about Tai Chi, they are primed to think of old people. What they may not know is that Tai Chi translates into "The Supreme Ultimate," which refers to its martial art prowess. It is a genuine martial art that is extremely deceptive and effective.

To be fair, however, I will warn you in advance that the martial art side of Tai Chi is not easy to learn. My earlier training in Korean Karate was a cakewalk in comparison.

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Finding a good instructor is paramount if you want to really learn the martial art. However, by focusing on the health aspects, you can still learn enough on your own to reduce your stress and improve your health from instructional Tai Chi DVDs, YouTube snippets, and by ordering instructional books. Initially I focused my efforts on the basic 13 postures and later studied the standardized 24 short forms. I trained solo for years until I decided to find an instructor and explore the fighting side.

Mayo Clinic

If you're still not convinced this is a viable option for reducing stress, please consider the following from the well known Mayo Clinic. Experts there say preliminary evidence suggests that Tai Chi (they lump Qigong and Tai Chi together) may offer numerous benefits beyond stress reduction, including:

1. Reducing anxiety and depression
2. Improving balance, flexibility, and muscle strength
3. Improving sleep quality
4. Lowering blood pressure
5. Relieving chronic pain
6. Increasing energy, endurance, and agility
7. Improving overall feelings of well-being

Final Thoughts

Studies show that chronic stress is very harmful. Reducing and controlling stress is therefore paramount to maintaining good health. Though there are many ways to do this, Qigong and Tai Chi are often overlooked as possibilities because people assign them esoteric qualities or think they are beyond their reach. Anyone, at any time, can benefit from this type of training.

One of my friends suffered from back pain combined with limited range of motion from injuries received early in his police career. I showed him some basic Qigong routines and worked with him over a period of several months. He stuck with it and is currently enjoying an enhanced range of motion and his back pain is all but gone. He is also finally getting a good night's sleep. The bottom line: whether you use Eastern or Western techniques, learn to manage your stress or it will manage you.